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THE FATE OF BURGLAR JOE;

Or, Nick Carter Unmasking a Villainous Crook.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."



NICK STRUCK ON HIS FEET, AND A REVOLVER WAS IN HIS HAND. A DELUGE OF BROKEN LATHS AND PLASTER FOLLOWED HIM

THE FATE OF BURGLAR JOE;

OR,

Nick Carter Unmasking a Villainous Crook.

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CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE AFFAIR AT DOCTOR RAYMOND'S.

"Doctor Martin Raymond."

Nick Carter read the name on a card before him. It was evening, and he sat in his office.

The card bore, besides the name, the address of the doctor. It was on Forty-seventh street near Fifth avenue.

"Specialist in nervous diseases. Still a young man. Fashionable. Makes a good income. I never met him."

Such was Nick's review of what he knew about Doctor Raymond. Then he gave orders to have him shown in.

They greeted each other, and then the doctor said:

"I want your advice."

"It is at your service."

"A mysterious affair has occurred at my house,"

"A crime?"

"No; but—"

"You fear that a crime will follow."

"I scarcely know what I fear. What I do know is this, that I need the advice of a man skilled in all sorts of mysteries, as you are."

"Very well; please state the facts."

"Yesterday afternoon about half-past five, two men called at my house. I was alone in my consulting-room."

"The men were admitted. They introduced themselves as father and son, and gave the name Fernandez."

"The older was short, very broad shouldered, and thick set. He was about fifty years old."

"His son was very tall, and strongly built. Both were handsome in face, and were well dressed."

"They said that their home was in Havana. I was not surprised, for they were of dark complexion, and looked like Cubans."

"My father," said the younger man, "wishes to consult you."

"What is the trouble?" I asked.

"Cataplexy," replied the elder man, gloomily. "You are, I believe, an expert in such diseases."

"I bowed, and then suggested that we proceed at once to the examination."

"At this the son immediately arose, and said that he would step into my waiting-room."

"I was about to urge him to remain, when he made a sign to me, behind his father's back."

"I understood him to mean that his father would answer my questions more freely if he were alone with me. This is often the case."

"I therefore said nothing more, and the young man passed into the waiting-room."

"We then proceeded to the examination. It had gone on for perhaps fifteen minutes, when suddenly I perceived a change come over the face of my patient."

"His eyes became fixed and expressionless. He was staring like a dead man. His form was rigid as iron. He sat bolt upright in the chair, with his hands clenched upon his knees."

"I recognized the symptoms at once. In the very act of describing his dreadful disease my patient had been stricken by it. He was in a cataleptic trance."

"The remedies which I employ in such cases were all down stairs in my laboratory—a room I have fitted up for the purpose in the basement."

"I hastened to this room, but some minutes were occupied in finding the medicines required."

"When I returned to my office it was empty."

"Considerably alarmed, I ran into the waiting-room to call the younger Fernandez. He had disappeared."

"Nobody had seen the men go out. In fact, nobody was in that part of the house except the boy who answers the bell. He usually sits in the lower hall, and runs up when the bell rings."

"He had heard nothing. I was at a loss to explain the affair."

"Naturally, I did not expect to see the men again, but this afternoon, at the same hour as before, they called upon me."

"They apologized profusely for their strange conduct of the previous day."

"My father's mind is always confused when he wakes from one of his trances," said young Fernandez. "He woke yesterday while you were out of the room. His memory on recent events was a blank, as it always is for a time after his seizures."

"He found himself in a strange house, and did not know how he got there. As quickly as possible he made his way to the street."

"I saw him pass out, and supposed that the consultation was over. When I overtook him on the sidewalk, his condition was such that he could not explain anything to me. I put him right into a carriage and took him to the hotel where we are staying."

"I was obliged to be contented with this explanation. Mr. Fernandez, Sr., earnestly requested me to continue my examination, so strangely interrupted, and I did so."

"The son again retired to the waiting-room. In half an hour we joined him there."

"The father had already thanked me, and paid my charges. I had advised him, and prescribed for him. Both men took their leave most civilly, and succeeded in making me forget the strangeness of their former leave-taking."

"They had hardly gone out, when Mr. Joseph Allen came in. I should have told you that Mr. Allen is a resident in my house. He is my patient, and also my partner."

"That's a strange combination," said Nick.

"It certainly is. I will explain it later. To continue my story: Mr. Allen went to his room, and immediately I heard an outcry."

"I ran up stairs, and along the hall to the rear of the house where his apartment is. The door was open, and I saw him running about in great excitement."

"Who has been in my room?" he cried, over and over again, without giving me a chance to answer him."

"He is an exceedingly nervous man. Indeed it is for a chronic nervous disorder that I have treated him for many years."

"Such was his excitement that I feared it would do him great injury."

"What makes you think that anybody has been in your room?" I asked, as soon as he gave me the chance."

"Look there!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the carpet, which is of a very light color."

"Upon the carpet I could plainly see the foot-prints of a man. It was a very long, but rather narrow foot—one easily recognized."

"Indeed, Mr. Carter, I am no detective, and yet I had no difficulty in assuring myself that that foot-print was made by the younger Fernandez."

"It was perfectly clear that he had visited Mr. Allen's room while I had been busy with my cataleptic patient."

"Is anything missing?" I asked hastily, turning to Mr. Allen."

"Missing?" he repeated, stupidly. "No; I don't think so."

"Has your safe been opened?" I asked, pointing to a strong-box on the floor by the foot of the bed."

"He paid no attention to my inquiry, but sank into an arm-chair, shivering as if with terror."

"Now, I could not see that there was any cause for great alarm. A thief had got into Mr. Allen's room, and had gone away without stealing anything. Why should Mr. Allen be so desperately afraid?"

"It is true that his nerves are in a diseased condition, but, in spite of my knowledge of that fact, I was surprised to see him yield to such childish fear."

"Had you ever seen him so before?" asked Nick.

"I was just going to tell you. About ten days ago he had a similar attack, but less violent."

"What caused it?"

"That is more than I can tell."

"What were the circumstances?"

"He sat in my office reading a paper."

"What paper?"

"The *Star*."

"Do you know the date?"

"Morning paper of a week ago Monday," replied Doctor Raymond; "but the paper had nothing to do with the attack."

"How do you know?"

"I examined the page which he had been reading. There was absolutely nothing of a startling or sensational character on it."

"Any deaths?"

"No."

"Any criminal news?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

"Very well; what happened?"

"He suddenly turned very pale, and rose from his chair. He trembled violently."

"At first I supposed it to be only one of his ordinary nervous attacks, but I soon saw the difference. I asked him what the trouble was, but he gave no satisfactory answer. He said it was a chill."

"His behavior, you say, was similar this afternoon when he found that somebody had been in his room."

"Yes."

"You are sure that nothing had been stolen?"

"He told me so afterward."

"Is that the whole story?"

"Yes; I succeeded in calming him, and then he told me that he was nervously alarmed about thieves. We talked for some time, and then I suggested getting advice regarding the matter which had so startled him. He consented, and I came to you."

"Did you tell him to whom you were going to apply?"

"No; I did not wish to alarm him. He would not hear of my consulting the police. So I told him that you were a friend of mine, and an unusually shrewd man."

"He asked if you could be trusted not to talk about the affair except to us, and I assured him that you could. Then he expressed a desire to see you."

"It was on his account, then, that you came?"

"Yes; I believe, as a physician, that it is important that something should be done to quiet his fears. You will do that, and at the same time will tell me just what you really think of the affair."

"I'll do the latter, at any rate," said Nick. "Come; let us talk with Mr. Allen."

They found the doctor's carriage at Nick's door.

"Does anybody live in your house except yourself, Mr. Allen, and the servants?" asked Nick, as the carriage started.

"No."

"How many servants have you?"

"An old woman as cook; her daughter as chamber-maid; and a young man who attends to the door."

"Nothing more was said till they reached the doctor's house. It seemed to be almost dark, except for a lamp in the doctor's office, a corner room."

"What's happened to the hall lamps, I wonder?" muttered the doctor, as he opened the door.

Certainly the hall was almost dark. The gas was not burning.

At the head of the stairs was an oil lamp, which seemed to have been placed there for some peculiar purpose, for it was shaded so that it shed no light in the upper hall.

What little light it gave was thrown along the stairs, but it burned badly, and the broad staircase was very dimly illuminated.

Without a word the two men began to ascend.

Suddenly they were aware of a hurried movement in the hall above. Then they heard a couple of sharp clicks.

A harsh voice cried:

"Stand where you are, or I'll shoot you dead!"

There was just light enough for Nick to see two pistol-barrels resting on the banister rail, and to make out the dim shape of a pale face behind them.

CHAPTER II.

NICK'S ADVICE.

"Never draw a pistol till you're ready," to shoot is a familiar saying in the West.

The man who confronted Nick Carter and Doctor Raymond came near learning the wisdom of that adage in a very unpleasant manner.

Nick was not the man to permit anybody to "hold him up." Despite the fact that the person at the head of the stairs seemed to have the drop, he would doubtless have had the worst of an exchange of shots.

But Doctor Raymond's exclamation prevented any such result.

"Allen," he cried, "what nonsense is this?"

"Is that you, doctor?"

"Of course it is."

"Who's with you?"

"The gentleman I spoke to you about—Mr. Nichols."

There was the sound of a match being struck in the upper hall. Presently the gas flamed up.

It showed Nick a fat man in a dressing-gown, much too large for him. This fact, and the flabby folds of skin upon his face and neck showed that, though he was still fat, he had been much fatter.

He had a pistol in one hand, and there was another sticking out of a pocket of the dressing-gown.

"I beg your pardon, doctor," he said; "but you know my excuse."

"A very alarming affair, Mr. Nichols," he continued.

"Of course, Doctor Raymond has told you about the thief. I have some reason to be alarmed, don't you think so?"

"I do," replied Nick.

"And you and the doctor got in so quietly that really I was almost sure you were the devils come back."

"You were prepared for them, I see," said Nick, pointing to the shaded lamp.

"Yes, indeed. I had to be. You see I'm all alone."

"How about the servants?"

"They asleep away off. This is a big house, and a queer house, too. Floors all deadened; couldn't hear a clap of thunder in the attic, if the thunder was right down in the parlor."

He was making a ghastly effort to be jocose, as Nick clearly saw.

Doctor Raymond led the way to Allen's room. It was very large, and had an alcove in which stood a great, old-fashioned bed.

Near this Nick saw the strong box which Doctor Raymond had mentioned.

All three took chairs.

"And now, sir," said Nick, "is it your desire to consult me?"

"Yes, indeed. Certainly. I feel the need of advice. I'm seriously alarmed."

"Why?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm not a rich man, Mr. Nichols, but my partnership with the doctor has yielded me something."

"And I don't trust banks. No, sir. I keep my own safe."

He pointed to the strong box.

"There it is. All I possess is in that box. If I lose it, I have nothing. Thieves are after it. The doctor has, of course, told you all about that matter."

"Who are these thieves?" asked Nick.

"Hasn't the doctor told you?"

"He told me what they pretended to be. I want to know who they are."

"How can I tell that?"

"Mr. Allen, you have asked me to advise you in a very serious matter. I can't do it unless you tell me the truth."

"Of course I'll tell you the truth. Doctor Raymond says you're safe, and he's about the only man I will trust."

"Very well. Do you still say that you believe the men who called here this afternoon wished to steal the contents of that box?"

"Why, certainly, and——"

"Good-night, Mr. Allen," said Nick, rising.

"What!" cried Allen. "You refuse to advise me?"

"I advise you to tell the truth," said Nick, as he left the room.

Doctor Raymond followed him instantly.

Allen remained standing with his mouth half open, as if he wanted to say something, and couldn't make up his mind what it should be.

"Come into my consulting-room," said the doctor.

"There's no use," said Nick. "I won't have anything to do with this man. I won't act for a client who tries to deceive me."

"Then advise me. I at least am acting in good faith."

"I will give you the best advice I have to offer. It is this: Keep close watch of Allen. Make him stay in the house where you can have your eye on him. Don't neglect this, for the case is very serious."

Doctor Raymond looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face lighted up.

"I understand you," he said, "and will do as you say."

Nick returned to his house in the doctor's carriage.

About eight o'clock the next morning, while Nick was in his office, he heard a carriage rattle up to the door and stop. Evidently the driver was in a great hurry.

Looking out of the window, Nick recognized Doctor Raymond's carriage. The coachman jumped off the box, ran up the steps of the house like a madman, and nearly broke the door-bell with the violence of his ringing.

Nick got down to the door ahead of his servant. He flung it open.

"Is Mr. Carter here?" asked the coachman, in hurried tones.

"I am he."

"Doctor Raymond wants you to come to his house just as soon as you can."

"What has happened?"

"Mr. Allen has hung himself."

Without asking for the particulars, Nick jumped into the carriage, which was instantly set in motion.

At the doctor's house, all was in confusion.

Doctor Markham, coroner's physician, was just entering. Nick went in with him.

At the head of the stairs was Doctor Raymond.

"This is dreadful," he said. "I had no suspicion of anything like this."

"Why not?" asked Nick. "I warned you."

"Warned me?"

"Yes."

"You told me not to let Allen go out of the house."

"I told you to watch him, to keep your eye upon him constantly."

"But I couldn't remain in his room all the time."

"You should have guarded it."

"I did. My servant—the young man I told you about—sat up in the hall all night; that is, after midnight."

"Where is he?"

"He has gone out."

These words were spoken while the three men were passing through the hall, and while the doctor was opening the door of Allen's room.

"It is exactly as I found it," Doctor Raymond said. "I have not allowed anything to be disturbed, not even the body."

The sight which confronted them within that room was shocking.

Allen's body hung by a rope from a strong hook in the ceiling.

The corpse was dressed only in a night-shirt, pantaloons, and slippers.

It seemed that the great weight of the body had drawn the neck out to twice its length. The face was even more distorted than is usual with persons who have been hanged.

The expression of terror which Nick had seen upon it, on the previous evening, was now horribly exaggerated. Evidently the man's last moments had been tortured by fear.

With a movement of his hand Nick prevented Doctor Raymond and the coroner's officer from advancing far into the room.

His quick eye swept over all the details of the scene.

"You see," said Doctor Raymond, "he had gone to bed. You can see the imprint of his body."

Nick nodded.

"I should say he had been dead about four hours when I found him. That would show that he hanged himself about three in the morning."

"Rather an early hour," remarked the coroner's physician. "Suicides usually wait till daybreak. Four to six o'clock is the hour."

"He seems to have smoked heavily all night," said Doctor Raymond, pointing to the stubs of two cigars in the grate.

"There's another on the edge of the desk," said Doctor Markham. "You'll find it the case quite often that men smoke constantly before they commit suicide."

"Suicide?" asked Nick.

"Certainly," replied both the doctors in chorus.

"Nonsense," said Nick, quietly. "There is no suicide here. This is murder, and one of the most deliberate, cold-blooded, and remarkable crimes ever committed in this city."

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT DETECTIVE'S FINE WORK.

Both the men whom Nick addressed started back in surprise when the word murder was spoken.

Doctor Raymond, however, quickly recovered from the shock.

"Impossible," he exclaimed.

"Why do you think so?" asked Nick, calmly.

"Whoever heard of such a murder as this? How could murderers hang a man in this house and nobody hear his cries?"

"It was done, nevertheless," said Nick.

"Impossible, I say again. The door was locked on the inside. You yourself removed the key just now."

"So I did; and I will ask you to look at it."

The two men sprang forward.

"Do you see those marks?" Nick asked, pointing to the end of the key.

"Nippers," said the coroner's physician, after a careful look.

"What do you mean?" cried Doctor Raymond.

"Take this magnifying glass," said Nick, drawing one from his pocket. "Now do you see the marks? They mean that the key was turned from the outside by an instrument which burglars use."

"But how could they have got into the house? That young man was in the hall. They couldn't have got to this door without his hearing them."

"That's true."

"Then your theory of murder breaks down."

"No, it doesn't."

"Why not?"

"Let me ask you a question: How long has that young man been in your service?"

"About a week."

"Where is he now?"

"He went to the police station to give information of this affair."

"How long ago?"

Doctor Raymond looked at his watch.

"Fifty minutes," he said.

"And no policeman has come to the house?"

"No."

"Well, that ought to settle it. He never went there. He was in the plot."

Doctor Raymond seemed to be overwhelmed by this statement. Then suddenly an idea flashed upon him.

"How could these men," he asked, "have got into Allen's room without waking him? They must have surprised him asleep, and gagged him, or somebody would have heard his cries."

"Well, so they did."

"Gagged him?"

"Yes. I knew that in a second. Look at his mouth."

Nick led the two men to the side of the dangling body. The feet were only a few inches above the floor, and the

face was thus about on a level with those of the men who now eagerly examined it.

"It is true," groaned Doctor Raymond. "There are the marks of a gag."

"They filled his mouth with rags and then put a tight bandage across," said Nick.

"It seems impossible," said Doctor Raymond. "I left Allen at midnight. He was so nervous that I was perfectly certain he would not sleep."

"They could not have come in and done that while he was awake," said Doctor Markham.

"Certainly not," Nick assented; "he was asleep fast enough."

"I can't believe it. Why, when I left him he was nearly mad. Sleep was impossible for him."

"And for that reason you sent him this glass containing medicine," said Nick, picking up a wineglass from a stand near the bed.

"Yes; I sent him that. I quite frequently sent him medicine at night."

"You sent it by your young man—the one who has disappeared?"

"Yes."

"What was in it?"

"Bromide of potassium. That is as good as anything in such a case as his."

"Any laudanum?"

"Certainly not."

"Smell the glass."

Nick held it under the doctor's nose and he started back with a cry.

"Laudanum! He was drugged."

"Certainly; and we know who did it."

"I guess that's right," said the coroner's physician.

"It must have been the Cubans," exclaimed Doctor Raymond.

"What Cubans?" asked Doctor Markham; and in reply Doctor Raymond briefly told the story of his mysterious patient.

"But they aren't Cubans," said Nick.

"Why not?"

"Look at these cigars."

As Nick spoke he picked up the stubs which Doctor Markham had noticed.

"These are all domestic cigars. No Cuban would ever have smoked them."

"Smoked!" cried Doctor Raymond. "Oh, come now, Mr. Carter, you don't mean to tell me that these men calmly smoked cigars while they were committing murder."

"No doubt about it. If they didn't smoke them, who did?"

"Why Allen, of course."

Nick felt in the pocket of a coat which was hanging over a chair.

"Here is Allen's cigar case," he said. "It contains one cigar; genuine Havana, very good quality. Nothing like these stubs."

"Smoked while they strung him up," muttered Doctor Raymond. "Smoked while they watched him in his death agonies. Well, for sheer, cold-hearted brutality this beats everything on record."

"Let us take down the body," said Nick; and they laid it upon the bed and covered it with a sheet.

"Now, Mr. Carter," said the coroner's physician, "since you seem able to read this criminal mystery like an open book, tell us how it was done."

"It was done by three men. Two of them Doctor Raymond has already described. The third was smaller than the others. He was short, slenderly built, and a good deal of a cheap dandy."

"Mr. Carter," said Doctor Raymond, "how can you possibly know that?"

"I know that he was small because I saw his muddy foot-prints on the light stair-carpet as we came up. They were not nearly so large as the others, and they were not so distinct, which shows that he stepped lighter."

"I call him a cheap dandy because he smoked cigarettes and oiled his hair."

"Oiled his hair?" cried Doctor Raymond. "Oh, come, Mr. Carter, this is going too far."

"I tell you he did. Look at that spot on the wall."

He pointed to a faint stain on the paper. It was just beside the dressing-case. A straight-backed chair stood in front of the spot.

"He sat in that chair," Nick continued, "and tilted it back against the wall. There's where he put his head. You can detect the smell of the hair-oil now."

"Tilt the chair back against the wall thus. You can see where the back legs of the chair were by the dents in the carpet. There, now, estimate the size of the man by the distance from the seat of the chair to the spot on the wall. He was very short; not over five feet five inches certainly."

"Now take these ashes from the floor. They are not cigar ashes."

"Certainly not," said the coroner's physician. "He smoked cigarettes sure enough."

"He smoked four," said Nick.

"Where are the stubs?" asked Doctor Raymond, suddenly.

"He carried them away in his pocket. The first one, he threw on the carpet. Then he thought it wouldn't be well to have it found, or one of the other men warned him, and he picked it up."

Doctor Raymond rubbed his forehead, as if he wished to make sure that he was awake.

"I've heard a good deal about your work, Mr. Carter," he said at last; "but I never thought that any man on earth could do what you're doing now."

"It is simple," said Nick. "Here is the mark where he stepped on the cigarette stub, to put it out. Then he must have picked it up, because if he didn't, where is it?"

"Of course, he put it in his pocket. Here are marks on the wall where he rubbed the ends of the other cigarettes in order to put them out, so that they wouldn't burn his pocket. Three marks, and one on the carpet is four. That makes the number I spoke of."

"And now let us go back. These three men came in by the front door. That means that your young man let them in."

"They went up stairs, the old man first, the dude second, and the tall man last."

It was now Doctor Markham's turn to hold up his hands in amazement.

"That's too much for me," he said.

"There can be no doubt of it. On the third stair from the bottom you will find a place where they all stepped in the same spot. You remember, Doctor Raymond, that I paused there when I came up."

"It is not at all difficult for a practiced man to tell in such a case which of the foot-prints was first made, and which last."

"They opened Mr. Allen's door with nippers, as I have described. Then, of course, they gagged him."

"By the time he had shaken off the influence of the drug, he was bound and helpless. What his feelings were, gentlemen, when he waked to find his enemies upon him, I leave you to imagine."

"They left him, I think, sitting up in the bed, and shaking, no doubt, with mortal terror. I presume that he was left in the bed, because I see no chair prepared for him, and because the pillows are rolled up as if they had been used to prop him in his helpless condition."

"Then the men lit more gas-jets, using this match, which you will notice is different from any I can find in the room. They drew back the curtains from the alcove, and then they took their places and proceeded with the trial."

"Trial!" cried both the doctors at once.

"Yes," said Nick, "it was a trial. The stout man sat by the table, and acted as judge. He took notes of the proceedings with a pencil. Here are the shavings of the pencil when he sharpened it. I know that Allen did not make them, because here is a gold pencil full of lead in his waistcoat pocket."

"When the evidence had all been presented they took a written ballot. It was probably unanimous. At any rate, the dude who sat by the desk, and wrote his ballot in ink, voted for death."

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Carter, are you something more than human?" exclaimed Doctor Raymond.

"Not a bit of it," said Nick. "Just look at this blotter." He picked up a common white blotter from the desk, and handed it to Raymond.

"I see nothing here but the usual network of lines," said Raymond.

"Give it back to me," said Nick.

He took out his knife, and with the large blade scraped the surface of the blotter, removing many lines and leaving others.

Then he handed the blotter back to Doctor Raymond. In the middle of it there now appeared—written backward, of course, as any word appears in such a case—the record of one of the ballots that had condemned Joseph Allen.

"Death!" cried the two doctors, in one breath, as they gazed upon the word

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRONG BOX AND THE SECRET PANEL.

"Did you suspect the secret last night?" asked Doctor Raymond, as soon as his surprise had somewhat subsided.

"I knew that Allen was afraid for himself and not for his money," Nick replied. "Anybody, I should think, could have seen that."

"And yet these men were thieves as well as murderers."

"Why do you think so?"

"His strong box is open and empty."

"It always was empty."

"What!"

"There was nothing of value in it."

"How do you know?"

"Did Allen examine it last night, after he found that the man had been in his room?"

"No."

"Is that likely, supposing that the box contained his fortune, as he said it did?"

"Well, I didn't think of that. I was a good deal excited at the time."

"You know perfectly well that he would have been on his knees before it, examining every nook and corner, if it had contained what he told us was in it."

"I think he would."

"Then he lied about the box?"

"He certainly did."

"What does that prove?"

"I can't say."

"It proves that the box was a blind. Now, when a man sets up a blind does he put any valuable thing in it?"

"No."

"So that settles the question of the safe. But it fooled the assassins."

"How do you know?"

"Because they didn't discover the real hiding-place."

"There is one, then, in this room?"

"Yes."

As Nick said this word, he approached the mantelpiece.

"It was here," he said to Doctor Raymond, "that you saw Allen last night."

Doctor Raymond nodded assent.

"Then," continued Nick, "it is in this part of the room that his real treasure is hidden."

The great detective examined with the utmost care the wood-work around the mantel-piece.

"I have found it," he said at last.

He touched a spring, and instantly a small rectangular piece of the wood-work started out.

Nick took hold of it, and pulled it farther out. It was a little secret panel which Nick had discovered.

It swung upon an invisible hinge, and behind it could be seen a little cupboard containing money and paper.

"The presence of these things here," said Nick, "shows how completely the assassins were fooled by that alleged safe. They were so badly fooled, in fact, that they hung their man first, and made their search afterward."

"That seems extraordinary," said Doctor Markham.

"You're almost certain to find one such blunder in every case like this," said Nick. "Those men were so dead sure that what they wanted was in that safe that they never even asked Allen whether it was there or not."

"Perhaps he refused to tell," said Markham.

"If you'd seen the man alive, said Nick, "you wouldn't say so. They could have made him think his life depended on it, and he would have told them anything they wished to know."

"Then they were looking for something?" said Raymond.

"Yes; their going through the safe proves that. What they wanted is here."

"The money?"

"No; you see there isn't much. Allen kept his money in the Tenth National Bank."

"Bank!" exclaimed Raymond, "why he was always saying that he wouldn't trust a bank."

"He lied," said Nick, calmly, "look at this check-book. Here's his balance figured up—whe!"

Nick's whistle was echoed by the others. Allen's balance in the bank was \$161,450.

The money in the secret locker was less than \$200. It was mostly in small bills.

"Now for the papers," said Nick. "Mostly memoranda of business transactions; throw no light on the present case. Ah! what's this?"

Among the papers Nick had found one which was unusual in its appearance. It was a queer-looking map of a piece of land, but where situated there was no apparent way of determining.

It seemed to be wild land, for the positions of several hills, rocks, and trees were indicated, but no houses, barns, roads, or fences.

The distances between some of these objects was put down, with the compass bearings.

"What do you make of that, Mr. Carter?" Raymond asked.

"This requires thought," said Nick.

"I should say it did."

"The meat of the whole transaction is here."

"But how is anybody to get it out?"

"One thing is certain," said Nick; "this map was made for the purpose of showing the location of this spot."

He touched a figure on the map. It was a square near the center.

In each corner of the square were four little marks shaped something like keys.

Nick fixed his eyes upon this peculiar diagram for several minutes, and then he again reached the locker.

"Here is a clew," he said.

In his hand he held a rusty key of a peculiar shape.

"I begin to see a little light," he said.

"It looks dark enough to me," said Raymond, shaking his head.

"This map," said Nick, "clearly shows the location of buried treasure."

"That much I grant."

"The spot is indicated by this square. The four marks on the square are four keys."

"I infer from that that four men buried the treasure. They were unwilling to trust one another, and so they made an iron vault or safe which could be opened only by means of four keys."

"Each man then procured his own key and kept it. Doubtless each has a plan of the spot, so that doesn't so much matter. But the key was really of some consequence to the assassins who were here last night."

"Then they failed in their purpose?"

"Oh, no; their principal purpose was revenge! That they have had, you must admit."

"Have you any idea why they took such a vengeance?"

"I can't say positively."

"It may be that he found a way to get all this treasure for himself."

"No; for in that case he would either have kept no key at all, or all four."

"Then you think that the treasure is still there?"

"I feel quite sure of it."

"But those men will get it!"

"Yes; they will unless we stop them. The key would be only a convenience, not a necessity.

"Probably the vault is so strong as to be very difficult to enter. But no place is strong enough to resist modern burglars' tools."

"Then I don't see what was the use of the four keys. They could betray one another just as well."

"No; you're mistaken. The place is probably near some traveled road. Perhaps it's on Staten Island or in Harlem.

"The vault is covered with dirt, and it is so strong that it can't be burglarized in a single night. That's what these fellows depended on.

"They said, if anybody tries to get in, he'll have to take two nights for it, and the hole in the ground will be noticed during the day.

"I believe that their scheme was good; and that I shall yet see that wonderful hiding-place and its treasure."

CHAPTER V.

BURGLAR JOE.

At this point Doctor Raymond was informed that three young men wished to see him.

"I guess they're reporters," said the coachman, who brought the information.

"What shall I say?" asked Raymond, turning to Nick. "Describe the affair as a suicide. Don't let them come up here."

"Shall I say anything about a reason for the suicide?"

"Temporary insanity caused by excitement about thieves. Don't tell who the thieves were. Just say that Allen got to brooding on the subject of burglars."

Raymond went down stairs to talk with the reporters. Nick took charge of the things found behind the secret panel. He pledged the coroner's physician to silence.

Doctor Markham presently went away, promising to send an undertaker to take care of the body. When the undertaker came, Nick joined Raymond in the consulting room. The reporters had got their story, and had gone away.

"I am impatient to go on with the investigation," said the doctor.

"Very well," Nick replied. "Let us see how far we have got. Here was a murder committed for purposes of revenge by three men. The murderers and the victim, years ago, buried a treasure.

"What we wish to learn is: Who were the murderers, who was the victim, what was the treasure, where did they get it, and where is it now?"

Doctor Raymond shook his head dubiously.

"That's a hard task," he said. "It doesn't seem possible."

"On the contrary, it is easy."

"How shall we go to work?"

"First, you must tell me how you came to know Allen. You said he was your patient, and your partner."

"It's a strange story," said Raymond. "In fact, everything in this case is remarkable.

"Twelve years ago I was a young man, with a fine medical education, and not a cent in my pockets. I knew that I could succeed if I could get a start, but that seemed nearly impossible.

"I won't weary you with a story of my struggles. Chance helped me.

"One day, as I was walking on Twenty-third street, I saw a man stricken with a cataleptic attack. I ran to his assistance; carried him into a drugstore; brought him to his senses; and at last took him home.

"He proved to be old Colonel Blakesley, the millionaire. Perhaps you think that his gratitude was what put me on the right road. Not a bit of it. I didn't even get a fee for attending him. I had to pawn my watch to pay for the carriage in which I took him home.

"His family physician took charge of the case. He happened to be at the house when I arrived. We had some conversation about Blakesley. And I gave my opinion.

"When that doctor—who was a famous specialist—told his story to the reporters, he mentioned my name, and in his blunt way said that I knew more about diseases of that kind than any other man in New York except himself.

"The next day Joseph Allen called upon me. He had read what that doctor had said.

"We had the most extraordinary conversation that ever was in the world, and it ended by my accepting this proposition: He was to buy this house, and establish me in it. I was to treat him, and give him three-quarters of all the money I made.

"That was our partnership. He was a very shrewd man. He believed that if I got into a fashionable neighborhood I should succeed.

"I have succeeded. My success has made him a rich man."

"A very wonderful story," said Nick.

"It certainly is."

"In all the years since then, you did not see the men who called themselves Fernandez, until day before yesterday?"

"Never saw or heard of any such people."

"Yet their enmity to Allen must date back to a time before you met him."

"I am sure of it. He has had no chance to meet them since then."

"Has he stuck pretty close to the house?"

"Indeed he has. Perhaps once a month he would go out in the forenoon. Except for that, he has been indoors till about five in the afternoon, when he has usually walked for an hour."

"Did he seem to fear anybody?"

"Not particularly. He was anxious, in a general way, to avoid observation, but I never saw him terror-stricken till that day in my office."

"When he was reading the *Sun*?"

"Yes."

"You have that paper?"

"Here it is."

"You know the page?"

"It was the fifth."

"Where was he sitting?"

"Just where you are now."

"Very well. Did he hold his paper this way?"

Nick took the sheet in the ordinary way with one hand on the upper left corner; the other on the lower right corner.

"That was the way," said Raymond.

"Suddenly he let the paper fall."

"Not entirely. He held on to it with one hand."

"Which hand?"

"The right."

"Then what he read was on the lower, right corner. A man startled in that way will almost always keep hold of the paper with the hand which is nearest the item that has startled him. Let us look at that part of the page."

Nick ran his eye rapidly over the lines. Suddenly he looked up with a peculiar glance.

Raymond was so excited that he jumped out of his chair.

"You have the clew!" he cried.

"It is all here in eight lines," said Nick.

"Read them!"

"Robert McCreary, James Harris, and Roland Brown, burglars sentenced in 1880, were released from Sing Sing prison to-day. They are three of the famous Cortlandt Bank gang. Besides that celebrated safe-cracking, they were suspected of the Maiden Lane burglaries in '78 and '79 by which large quantities of jewelry were secured, but the crimes could never be traced to them."

"What can that have to do with the present case?"

"I will show you. In the first place you must know the story of the Cortlandt Bank burglary.

"It was very cleverly worked. The burglars got in

from an adjoining building. They secured a great sum in cash and negotiable bonds.

"McCreary, Harris, and Brown were arrested purely on suspicion. There was not a particle of direct evidence.

"The men would certainly have been acquitted but for the treachery of their partner, Joseph Hanlon, known as 'Burglar Joe.'

"He made a deal with the authorities. They were so anxious to get this gang broken up that 'Burglar Joe' was promised complete protection from the law if he would testify.

"He sent his three partners to prison for fifteen years each, and the case against himself was dismissed.

"Burglar Joe hid himself. Where? In this house, Doctor Raymond. He was your partner and your patient while his pals were in Sing Sing.

"Was there ever a cleverer way of hiding? You never suspected that the capital which started you in business came from a burglar's plunder."

"Can it be possible?"

"It is true. Of course the money did not come from the bank. Burglar Joe had to return that plunder. But he had doubtless been in many other successful burglaries, and there's where he got his money.

"Now you see why he feared vengeance. Now you understand the mystery of your cataleptic patient.

"That was McCreary. He was the oldest of the three. He must be a clever actor to deceive you, an expert."

"Then these three men tried and executed their treacherous partner in my house," cried Doctor Raymond.

"No doubt of it. And now for the treasure. That is doubtless a part of the proceeds of the Maiden Lane burglaries.

"A vast quantity of jewelry was taken, and it never was accounted for. It did not appear in the pawn-shops, and none of it was ever found in the possession of 'fences.'

"It was thought that Burglar Joe must have taken it abroad. But we now know that it was hidden.

"We have a diagram of the spot. We have one of the four keys of the robbers' treasure house. We shall find the jewels."

"But there's no way of finding out where they are buried."

"Yes, there is."

"The diagram gives no clew. That spot may be anywhere in the United States."

"True."

"Then what can you do?"

"Get on the track of the men. They'll lead me to the treasure straight enough."

"But how can you get on their track?"

"The first clew will be given us by the boy who used to answer your door-bell."

"You mean the one I had before the fellow who was put here by those villains?"

"Exactly."

"Was he in league with them?"

"Certainly not."

"Then how can he help us?"

"When he left you what did he tell you? Don't answer. I'll do it for you. He said that he had a new position offered him at much higher wages."

"That is what he said."

"You asked him about it, and he would not tell where it was. Perhaps he said it was in an office down town."

"So he did."

"Do you know where he lived?"

"Yes."

"Then we will go to his house."

"Why?"

"We shall find him out of a job again."

"You mean that they deceived him."

"Exactly. They probably hired an office down town. They put in a little furniture. Then one of them met your boy on the street; got into conversation with him; and offered him a good job.

"He has sat in their office for a week or more doing nothing, and thinking what a soft job he has struck. But by this time he has begun to wonder where his employers are and who is going to pay him his salary.

"Of course they've skipped. We shall get a new description of them from him, and may get a clew."

"They went at once to the boy's house. There they found Nick's reasoning verified.

"The boy had not seen his employers for four days. He had got no salary, except two dollars which they had given him as an advance.

"That morning, when he had gone to the office, he had found somebody else moving in.

"Nick took the boy in charge, and they left the house.

"What do you intend to do with him?" asked Doctor Raymond.

"I'm going to hang around one or two places where these fellows may show up, and see if this boy can get his eye on one of them."

"Isn't that rather a faint chance?"

"I don't think so.

There is one of their old pals named Ledyard who keeps a tough restaurant on Sixth avenue.

"He's a half-performed crook; doesn't go in for burglary any more, but in his days was one of the slickest cracksmen in the world. If these fellows are going to have a hard time cracking their own safe, it may be that they will get him to help them. At any rate I shouldn't be surprised if they gave him a call."

"The three rode down town in a closed carriage. On the way Nick completely disguised his two companions.

"All the afternoon they hung around Ledyard's place, but without any result.

"It was about seven in the evening. Nick and the boy were standing near the side entrance of Ledyard's place.

Suddenly Nick said:

"Don't jump. Don't show any sign of recognition."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy.

"I mean," said Nick, "that here comes your man."

A thin, sickly-looking man, very handsomely dressed, was advancing along the street. He carried a switch cane, and was smoking a cigarette.

The boy swore a round oath.

"That's him!" he cried, and would have sprung forward, forgetful of Nick's warning.

But the detective clapped his hand over the boy's mouth, and turned him around.

"You go to Doctor Raymond and stay with him," said Nick. "Tell him to take you home. And say to him that I am on the trail."

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOUSE IN HIGHWOOD.

Harris, the dude burglar, entered Ledyard's place, as Nick had expected.

The detective followed in a moment.

Harris walked up to the corner of the bar where Ledyard stood.

"Well," said Harris, "I'm off."

"This evening?"

"Yes. I'll take my bag now. Much obliged to you for taking care of it for me."

Ledyard reached behind the bar, and drew out an ordinary traveling bag. He handed it to Harris.

"Good-by, Jim," he said. "Good luck to you."

They shook hands, and then Harris went out.

Nick had made a note of several things. First, the bag was not Harris'.

It was not new enough to have been bought since Harris came out of prison. It was not old enough to have been bought before he went in.

Second, the bag was very heavy. Third, Harris tried to disguise the fact that the bag weighed more than usual.

"It's as plain as print," said Nick to himself. "The bag contains a burglar's kit. Harris has bought or borrowed it of Ledyard."

"He's going to dig up that treasure. I believe that the job will be done to-night."

When Nick got upon the street he took off his hat, looked into it, and then put it wrong end front.

A young man, lounging on the opposite side of the street, immediately crossed, and followed Nick.

Harris was walking briskly down toward Forty-second street. He did not look behind him, and if he had, he never could have seen the secret communication between Nick and his clever young assistant, Patsy.

"If he goes to the Grand Central," Nick said, "see his ticket and wire Chick where he is going."

"If he goes down town, follow us till we get to one of the ferries. Then wire Chick and leave a trail for him to follow."

"In any case he is to follow me. Let him be prepared for a desperate fight."

Patsy passed on, whistling as if he hadn't a serious thought in his head.

At Forty-second street, Harris took the elevated down town. Nick and Patsy were on the same train.

Harris got off at Chambers street. Nick followed him to the ferry of the New Jersey Northern Railroad.

The burglar bought a ticket for Highwood, N. J. So did Nick.

Nothing of any consequence occurred on the ride out. They arrived about half-past eight o'clock.

Harris, with his bag in his hand, walked up the street from the depot. After walking about ten minutes Nick saw upon the right a large house which stood back from the road.

The burglar went straight to the door and rang the bell.

Nick had skirted the path, and reached the house ahead of Harris. The detective lay concealed very near the door when the ex-convict rang the bell.

There was a bright light in the parlor of the house, and another in the hall. One of the upper rooms was also illuminated.

Presently the door was opened and Harris entered. Nick caught sight of the person who answered the bell.

He was dressed as a butler, and looked like an Englishman of fifty years or more. He was short, squarely built, and of light complexion.

"Can that be McCreary?" thought Nick. "He is a good deal that sort of a man. His Cuban rig, when he called on Raymond, was a clever disguise. There's nothing dark about him except his record."

Nick was now determined to get a look into the interior of the house. He succeeded, after much difficulty, in getting a place where he could look into the parlor.

Only one person was there—a young man of gigantic stature. He was sitting before a table, and Nick thought at first that he was writing.

"That's Brown," said the detective to himself. "I'm sure of it. And he isn't writing; he's making figures. I should say that he was working a problem in arithmetic."

"But what can these men be doing here? They haven't had time to fit up this house, and I can see by the looks of it that it hasn't been standing vacant. I must see that upper room."

With the utmost caution, Nick climbed the veranda. One of the windows was open a little at the top. The wind blew the curtain aside so that Nick could look in.

McCreary and Harris were there. They seemed to be in earnest conversation, but they spoke so low that not a word reached the detective's ears.

He could hear the hum of their voices but nothing more, at first. Then he became aware of another sound.

Just what it was he could not say. It did not seem to be in the room.

Finally it grew so loud that Nick was able to determine its cause.

The sound was that of the sobbing of a woman. Nick was sure of it. At first it seemed possible that a child was making the sound, but the detective's quick ear soon corrected that impression.

But where was the woman? The sound was not clear; it was stifled as if it came through walls.

Nick knew that the two criminals must hear it. Indeed he could tell by their impatient gestures that they were discussing it.

The sound grew louder. At last Harris evidently lost his temper.

He pulled a big revolver from his pocket, and rushed to one of the doors. It evidently communicated with a rear room.

Harris unlocked the door, and flung it open. As he did so, Nick covered him with his revolver.

If Harris had raised his arm to fire Nick would certainly have dropped him in his tracks. But he only flourished the revolver. He evidently had no intention of using it.

So Nick lowered his weapon, and as he did so, he heard Harris say in a low, fierce voice:

"Keep still in there!—Another sound from you, and it'll be the last you'll ever make."

Instantly the sobbing ceased.

Harris closed the door and locked it.

"Now, old man," he said, "it's time to get to work."

"No, not yet. Suppose somebody should come to the house?"

"Well; you could go to the door."

"I won't risk it. I must be right on hand. Wait till later."

"All right, if you say so. There's plenty of time."

"You stay here, and keep an eye on—"

McCreary did not finish his sentence. He simply jerked his thumb in the direction of the door.

Harris nodded.

"I'll go down stairs, and see whether his nibs has finished his figuring."

McCreary left the room.

Nick was in considerable doubt as to what he should do. Evidently these men had prisoners in that back room.

Should he release them? Nick would have been glad to do them that service, but on reflection he decided not to try it at once.

It was of the first importance that the suspicions of the criminals should not be aroused. Nick did not think it would be possible to set the prisoners free without giving an alarm, especially as there was a woman among them.

As he was debating the question, he heard the sound of a carriage on the driveway leading to the house.

Creeping around the end of the veranda, he took up a position directly over the front door.

The carriage had stopped. Nick could make out a man and woman within it, for it was an open vehicle.

The driver had got down from his position, and was just ringing the door-bell.

McCreary, in the guise of a butler, appeared at the door.

"Ah, Stewart, is that you?" called the man from the carriage.

"No, sir; if you please. Stewart has gone away, sir. I'm the new butler, an' me name is Johnson, with your leave, sir."

"Well, Johnson, is Colonel Harding at home?"

"No, sir; the whole family's gone to the city."

"Ah, I'm sorry. Dunham, leave cards."

The driver handed cards to McCreary, the ex-convict. Then the carriage drove away.

"Well, these fellows beat the deck!" said Nick, under his breath. "For cold nerve there isn't their equal on top of the ground."

He had no doubt, now, who the prisoners in the back room were. They were Colonel Harding and his entire family, with the servants, too, no doubt.

How this great stroke of villainy had been accomplished, he did not know, nor could he fathom the motive.

It could not be robbery, for certainly the burglars had had time to steal everything in the house, if they had wished to do so.

"I must try to find out something more about Colonel Harding," said Nick.

He dropped softly down from the veranda, and began to make a circuit of the house.

The ground immediately behind it seemed to have been left just as nature had designed it. There grew some very large trees, and in the midst of them, Nick could distinguish, in spite of the darkness, the glint of a great white rock.

It seemed to bear against the trunk of a giant tree. A flash of recollection passed over Nick's mind.

He ran to the rock, and knelt beside it. The gleam from the little lamp he always carried, soon broke out upon the darkness.

The rock shielded him from observation.

He drew a piece of paper from his pocket. It was that which he had taken from the hiding-place in Burglar Joe's room.

He unfolded it and examined the diagram.

"It is the place, beyond any doubt," he said.

Drawing out a pocket compass, he took a bearing from the rock, and paced off a certain distance very carefully.

"There should be a tree here," he said. "Ah, here is the stump, half buried.

"That settles the location. Now, the spot where the treasure was buried can be reached from here, from the rock, or from either of two other places, according to directions on the diagram.

"The rascals were too shrewd to select only one landmark which might be removed. Now, north by east, two hundred and ten feet from this tree."

He paced carefully. Every step measured a yard.

Sixty-three paces brought him to the southern corner of Colonel Harding's house.

"Well, by all the seven wonders of the world!" ejaculated Nick. "This man Harding has built his house right on top of that treasure."

CHAPTER VII.

NICK TAKES A LEAP IN THE DARK.

The discovery which Nick had made explained the only point which had previously puzzled him.

He now knew why Burglar Joe had not dug up the buried treasure. Naturally he would have waited a year or more until he was certain that the police no longer watched him.

It was during that time that Colonel Harding's house had been built.

Nick felt sure that the treasure had not been discovered by the workmen who built the house. Such a find could not have been kept secret.

"It was buried deep," Nick said to himself. "It is under the cellar floor of that house now."

His future movements seemed to be perfectly simple. He had only to wait until Chick and Patsy arrived, and then the criminals could be taken into custody.

He decided to go down the road to meet them. Otherwise they might possibly miss the house.

Just as he turned away, a sharp cry rang out upon the night.

It was a woman's scream, and it came from the room in which the prisoners were confined.

The cry ended abruptly as if a strong hand had grasped the woman's throat. Nick's chivalrous instincts would not permit him to disregard the appeal which spoke in that shriek.

What could he do? To enter the house, boldly, and confront the three well-armed and desperate men within was madness.

It would do no good. Cunning and not brute force must win in this battle.

To get into the house, and stand ready to take the part of the helpless prisoners was what Nick resolved to do; but he would enter secretly.

It would not do to get in on the ground floor. Some one of the ruffians would certainly have command of the main hall.

It seemed better to make an entrance higher up, and work down to them.

A lightning-rod ran up the rear of the house.

Nick seized it and went up like a sailor.

It was his intention to ascend to the roof, but just under the peak of the gable he came to a round window. It evidently lighted a garret.

He put his hand upon this window, and found that it could be opened.

In a second he was inside the garret.

It was entirely unfinished. The beams were not completely floored over.

The darkness was intense. Nick drew out his light, and flashed it ahead of him.

His glance rested upon what seemed to be a trap-door by which he could get down into the house.

At the instant when he saw this, another cry was uttered below him. What horror was being enacted down there?

Nick determined that not an instant should be lost.

He sprang ahead, across the beams. Just as he did so, he heard the hissing, cruel voice of Harris-below.

"Kill her!" it cried, "and make an end of this."

The sound added speed to Nick's feet. He made a great bound forward into the darkness.

There was a crashing sound. The whole house seemed to be yielding under his feet.

He flung out his arms, but met no solid support.

In an instant he shot straight down from the dark garret into a brightly-lighted room below.

A deluge of broken laths and plaster followed him, making a fearful din, in the midst of which he heard the voices of the three ex-convicts howling with fear and rage.

Nick's sudden descent might have given him an advantage. It frightened his foes, but never for an instant did the great detective's presence of mind desert him.

He struck on his feet, and a revolver was in his hand.

The shock of the fall was violent, but Nick was practically unhurt. The air was full of the white dust from the broken plaster, yet Nick made out the details of the scene instantly.

He was in a large bedroom. The clothes had been torn from the bed, and thrown into a corner. Upon them lay a fine-looking old man, who seemed to have suffered an injury of the head.

Although his wound certainly disabled him, he was securely bound. There was a rude bandage around his head.

Nick had no doubt that this was Colonel Harding. He had fallen in defense of his home.

Near him was a woman about fifty years old. She was fastened, hand and foot, to a heavy chair in which she was sitting.

A gag was in her mouth, but it had slipped so much that she had been able to cry out. Her scream had summoned Nick. Of this he had no doubt.

Bound to another chair was a beautiful young woman, whom Nick instantly guessed to be the daughter of Colonel and Mrs. Harding. She was in a dead faint.

McCreary and Harris stood one on each side of Mrs. Harding. On Nick's left, near the bed, stood the giant figure of Roland Brown.

So much Nick saw in an instant, as he braced his muscles after the shock of his fall.

The three criminals, dazed with the suddenness of his strange appearance, were for a moment incapable of attack.

Here was Nick's opportunity. He might have held that gang covered, and killed or captured them all.

But fate played him an ugly trick. He had stepped forward, drawing a second pistol as he did so, when there came a great crash.

Some heavy object struck Nick squarely on the head. A blinding dust enveloped him. He was borne to the floor.

A great piece of plaster, loosened by his fall, had trembled for a moment, and had then crashed down upon him.

Plaster is heavy. It falls very hard. The human head, which happens to be in its way, stands a first-rate chance of being broken.

Nick's head was not so unfortunate, but he was dazed and nearly blinded.

As he struggled to his feet, the giant Brown saw his

chance. He seized the two heavy mattresses off the big bed, and, holding them before him, flung himself upon Nick's prostrate body.

One of the detective's pistols cracked, but the bullet lodged in the mattresses instead of in Brown's heart.

The great weight pinned Nick to the floor. His right hand was under the mattresses; his left wrist Brown had seized with both of his hands.

In a second the other two criminals came to their pal's aid. Nick was a prisoner.

Bruised, bleeding, and helpless, the detective was dragged to his feet.

A rope had been passed around his arms, pinioning them behind him. Brown held him by the collar, while Harris pointed a pistol at his head.

McCreary faced him, livid with rage.

"Who's this?" he cried. "Here, let's have a look at him."

Nick's face was so covered with dust and blood that his best friend would not have known him.

McCreary took a towel from a rack in the corner, and wet it in a pitcher of water.

Then he mopped Nick's face, washing off dust, blood, and the artificial lines of his disguise.

"Ah!" said McCreary, "it seems to me that I know you."

"Guess not," said Nick. "I never met but one such scoundrel as you are, and he was hanged."

"Nervy, isn't he?" said Harris. "We'll take that out of him."

"You go outside, Jim, and see whether there are any more of them."

"Right you are, old man. I'll go. And, as for you, take that!"

The little coward, as he said those words, strode up to Nick and struck him full in the face with his fist, while Brown held him from behind.

"I owe you one, Mr. Harris," said Nick, quietly; "and you'll find me good pay."

Harris laughed. Then he hurried away to obey his chief's instructions.

McCreary was still staring at Nick.

"Yes—you," he said, "I know you. You're a true chip of the old block. You look just like your father."

"Thank you, Mr. McCreary," said Nick. "The resemblance has been noticed quite often."

"Brown, this is Nick Carter, old Sim Carter's son. It was his father who put me behind the bars."

"Why not?" asked Nick, blandly. "That's where you belong."

"Look here, young man!" said McCreary, in a voice trembling with passion, "you won't be so flip when you hear how I propose to settle with you for the little account I had with your father."

"If it's a debt to pay," said Nick, "I'm safe. It's pretty well known that you never pay your debts."

In keeping the rascals talking, Nick had a definite object. He wished to gain all the time he could, for there was no telling how long it might take Chick and Patsy to find him.

His last retort made McCreary grind his teeth with rage.

"What do you propose to do with him?" asked Brown.

"When we get that stuff out of the vault," said McCreary, with a horrible oath, "we'll put this fellow into it. We'll bury him alive."

Nick met this awful threat with smiling composure. But, for all that, a chill struck to his heart.

He knew that the horrible sentence would be executed as surely as that which had been pronounced upon Burglar Joe, unless help came.

And the man capable of facing the idea of being buried alive, without an inward tremor of horror, has not yet been born.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIGGING FOR TREASURE.

"Tie him down on that iron bedstead, Brown," said McCreary. "That's the safest place for him at present."

"I thought you intended to take them all down cellar while we work. If we leave them here they may make a noise, and we couldn't hear it."

"We'll take them down there by and by. At present we have other work on our hands."

"What work?"

"We must be sure that this devil hasn't brought any more of his kind."

"Jim will attend to that."

"We'd better all go and make a thorough search."

"Perhaps you're right."

Brown lifted Nick upon the bed as easily as if he had been a bundle of feathers. Then he tied him down with many a turn and twist of the rope.

His mouth was then forced open, and a bandage tied over his tongue. It was fastened tightly at the back of the head.

As a gag it was a failure, but as an addition to Nick's misery it was a great success.

"Now one last word to you all," said McCreary. "If one of you gets his gag loose and raises a rumpus I'll torture you as no red Indian ever tortured a prisoner."

He went out and shut the door: Nick heard him turn the key in the lock. The prisoners were left to their own devices.

Nick quietly tested his bonds. They were too strong for him. Not even his great strength could burst those ropes.

"Mr. Carter."

It was the elder woman's voice.

"Yes," said Nick.

"Oh, I am so glad that you can speak!"

"I can speak all right. Those fellows don't understand gags, but they can tie knots to beat a sailor."

In view of his own experience, Nick wondered that Burglar Joe had been so effectually silenced on the preceding night. In the present instance, however, the crooks doubtless knew that there was no real need of gags. The nearest house was almost half a mile away. With Doctor Raymond's resident patient, it had been a different matter.

"How came you here?" said the woman.

"I trucked these villains. Tell me how they managed to overpower you all."

"My daughter and I were alone in the house at noon today, except for the servants. There was a ring at the bell, and the butler answered it."

"They must have seized him by the throat the instant he opened the door. I was in the parlor. I heard an unusual noise in the hall, and stepped to the parlor door."

"In an instant I was seized, and choked until I lost consciousness. My daughter was made a prisoner at the door of her room in the same manner."

"It was probably an easy matter to overpower the two female servants. The coachman was at the station waiting for Colonel Harding. He was at the Englewood station, about a mile below here. Colonel Harding was coming out on an express which did not stop at Highwood."

"When my husband arrived, he was struck down the instant he entered the front hall. I suppose that the coachman and the groom were taken in the stable."

"Where are the servants now?"

"They are in the cellar. I learn this from what these wretches have said."

"Hush! Some one is coming."

There was a considerable noise outside the door.

Two of the desperate villains had returned. To judge by the sound, they were carrying some heavy object which they threw down upon the floor.

Then the key turned in the lock. The door was thrown open.

Brown and McCreary entered, bearing what seemed to be a corpse.

"Here's a friend of yours, Mr. Carter," said McCreary. "Yes," said Brown, "we found him looking for you, and so we politely showed him up." McCreary laughed.

"He didn't want to come at first," he said. "In fact he seemed to object to the society of my friend Harris."

"He was impolite enough to knock Harris down, and he was running away. But he ran right into the arms of my friend Brown, who squeezed the life out of him, I guess."

"Do you know him, Carter?" asked Brown, turning the face of the unconscious prisoner toward Nick.

Nick succeeded in raising his head high enough to see over the edge of the bed.

One glance realized his fears. The prisoner was Patsy. Nick could not help realizing that the situation was now desperate. Chick, alone, and imperfectly aware of the nature of the case, could hardly effect a rescue.

He was far more likely to fall into the clutches of these murderous villains.

Brown let Patsy's head fall back upon the floor. Then he and McCreary sat down, and stared at Nick.

Presently McCreary began to laugh in a low, chuckling way such as a demon might have evied.

"I'm thinking how you'll look, Mr. Carter," said he, "when they find you in the vault, you know. We shall be far beyond pursuit by that time."

"We have a very nice little plan for our escape. I'd like to tell you about it. You're said to be a shrewd man, and you'd enjoy it. But prudence forbids. Ah, here's Jim."

Harris entered at that moment.

His left eye showed the mark of Patsy's fist, and his face wore an even more diabolical expression than usual.

"It's all right," he said. "There's nobody else about the place."

"Then let's get to work," said Brown, rising. "The first thing to do is to get these prisoners down cellar."

Patsy and Colonel Harding were carried down. The others were made to walk.

The manner in which Nick was managed showed that the criminals knew him well for a very dangerous man.

His hands were fastened behind him. A rope was tied to each of his ankles. While Brown held him by the collar, Harris took one of the ropes and McCreary the other.

In this remarkable fashion Nick was led to the cellar. A single gas-jet lighted a small part of it.

Near the stairs Nick saw the servants fastened in various attitudes to iron or brick pillars which supported the house.

Nick was led to that part of the cellar where the light burned. He was made to sit down on the cement floor with his back against a brick pillar, to which he was securely tied with ropes.

"Now, Brown," said McCreary, "have you figured this thing out?"

"Sure," replied the gigantic ruffian. "The old shanty stood right here. The vault is just under my feet."

Brown stamped with his heel upon the floor.

"I made my measurements and marked the spot while you were up stairs," he continued.

"How deep have we got to go?"

"About twelve feet."

"Well, then, here goes," cried McCreary, stripping off his coat.

Brown also prepared to work, but Harris, the dude, remained sitting on a keg, smoking a cigarette.

"Come along, Jim," said Brown.

"I say," drawled the dandy crook, "it's going to be a big job."

"Have you just found that out?"

"No; but I've just got an almighty bright idea."

"What is it?"

"Why, to make these fellows do the work for us."

Harris waved his hand in the direction of the spot where the servants were.

"There are three able-bodied men," he continued.

"Four," exclaimed McCreary. "There's Carter."

"Is it safe to let him loose?"

"Safe?"

McCreary uttered a fearful imprecation, and drew a big revolver at the same time.

"I'd like to see him try any game while my eye's on him."

Then he began to laugh.

"I did some hard work for the State on his father's account," he said. "It will please me a good deal to get square for a part of it."

"I wouldn't let all four of them loose at the same time," said Brown.

"Then we'll work 'em in pairs. Let Carter and the coachman take the first trick."

This suggestion came from Harris. It was immediately acted upon.

Nick and the coachman were set free. They were provided with tools and were ordered to cut away the cement floor.

McCreary directed operations with a revolver always ready. Brown lent the aid of his enormous strength to the work. Harris still sat on the keg. He had a revolver in each hand.

Nick was never more delighted in his life than when he was unbound and set to work. For all that, he realized that it would be madness to attempt resistance.

He might kill one of the ruffians with a pickaxe, or shovel, but the others would certainly kill him.

He could hope for no support from the coachman, who was a spiritless fellow, and shook with fear that one of the revolvers would go off accidentally and shoot him.

It was half-past ten when the work was begun. Daylight was struggling down into the cellar long before Nick's shovel struck the metal top in the treasure vault.

Coachman, butler, and footman had taken turns at the work, but McCreary had kept Nick at it all the time.

"This is going to be his grave," said McCreary, "and it's only fair that he should have a chance to see that it's properly dug."

"Thanks, Mr. McCreary," Nick replied, "I think I shall like it as well as any grave I ever had."

The excitement of the criminals when the vault was reached rose to fever heat.

Nick's was not less than theirs. His grave was dug, and these men intended to consign him to it without mercy.

CHAPTER IX.

TRICKED AND TRAPPED.

The top of the vault was about five feet square. Its door opened upward.

It gave every indication of massive strength. Nick wondered how these men, though they were all skilled workers in iron, had ever been able to put it together. It must have been the work of many months.

Probably during that time one of them had inhabited the old shanty which Nick had heard mentioned during the night. It doubtless stood above the vault, and shielded them while they were at work upon it.

"How long will it take us to crack it?" asked Harris.

"You ought to be the best judge, Bob, for you had most of the castings made."

"It will be a long job," said McCreary.

Then he swore frightfully, and called down curses on the memory of their traitorous comrade, Burglar Joe.

"Where did he hide that key? If we had it we could finish the job and be out of here before people begin to stir about much."

"As it is we'll have to hold this house all day, perhaps," said Brown.

"We might as well quit talking and go to drilling," said McCreary.

"Tie up Carter and the other fellow."

"Never mind tying Carter. Perhaps we can make him useful. Tie up the other fellow."

It was done. Nick was permitted to sit on the edge of the hole that had been dug.

Only two of the crooks could work to advantage on the safe door. The other guarded Nick.

The great detective was not altogether hopeless. He had worked with brain as well as hands during that night.

The ground through which he had dug had seemed firm and hard. It had been possible to leave three sides of the excavation almost perpendicular.

There was one important point which Nick believed that no eye except his had seen.

The wall upon one side was really weak. Throughout the night he had done what he could to weaken it.

He had cleverly managed that the greater part of the earth taken from the excavation should be piled on the weak side.

In short he had been setting a trap. He had constructed that hole so that one side of it was on the point of caving in.

The cement floor of the cellar held it up, but Nick believed that he could strike a single blow with a pick on that floor, and send the side wall and the great pile of earth above it down into the hole.

If he could catch two of the criminals in the cave-in, he believed that he might deal with the other.

But how was he to spring the trap? The vigilance of the sentry seemed never to relax. Nick was covered, every instant of the time, by revolvers, in the hands of his cold-blooded captors.

Harris was on the outside. McCreary and Brown were bending over the iron top of the vault.

"Here, Jim," McCreary called, "come down here a minute."

"How about Carter?"

"Brown will go up and look out for him."

The big burglar began to climb the side of that hole which had been left on a slant for that purpose. Harris started to go down.

He still kept his pistol leveled toward Nick.

Brown was just drawing his own weapon, so that he could mount guard.

Suddenly McCreary stopped drilling, and began to swear.

"To think how easy we could do this," he exclaimed, "if we only had that other key."

"There it is," said Nick, suddenly, and threw it down into the hole.

It fell ringing upon the iron.

Nick had chosen his opportunity well. It is easier to throw two sentinels off their guard than one.

Brown depended on Harris to guard Nick. Harris depended on Brown.

That was just what Nick knew would happen.

When that key fell, both men dove down the side of the slant.

Their excitement carried them away. They forgot their presence in their wild desire to see that key.

Then Nick sprang his trap.

He struck with his pick at the cement floor. He knew exactly where the blow must be directed.

With a rush the bank fell in. The great heap of earth, which had been taken from the hole, fell down upon the heads of the treasure-seekers.

McCreary and Harris, who were bending down to get the key, were crushed against the iron top of the safe.

Brown was more fortunate. He had just realized that Nick was left unguarded.

Perhaps he heard the detective move, though his motions were almost noiseless.

At any rate, Brown straightened up to his full height, and met the rush of earth upon his broad chest.

He discharged his pistol wildly up into the air, but the bullet went nowhere near Nick.

Then, dropping his pistol, the gigantic desperado gave his undivided attention to getting out of that hole.

He clawed his way up the bank.

Nick might have struck him down, but he did not. It looked too much like murder, to kill a man in a hole like that.

Man to man, Nick was willing to meet the gigantic criminal, and try his strength.

It was a fair field, and no favor. Neither man had a weapon.

Brown had lost his in the cave-in, and Nick's had been taken from him when he was captured. The pickaxe he had thrown down.

With a dreadful yell of rage, the giant sprang upon the detective.

Nick leaped to one side. He had no desire to wrestle with such an antagonist. He put his faith in skill and hard blows.

As Brown lurched by him, Nick struck hard and true. If the criminal had not had the skull of a bull, the blow would have brought him to the ground.

As it was, it confused him, but no more. He turned, and again rushed upon Nick.

Again the detective stepped aside, and planted a blow without receiving a return.

The burglar was hurt, but he was far from being disabled.

His experience in these brief seconds had taught him caution. He realized that he must bring his strength to bear and do it speedily, or he would fall beneath the terrible blows of his antagonist.

He advanced upon Nick slowly, prepared to close with the detective, if the least chance offered.

In spite of himself, Nick was forced into an unfavorable position.

The pit was on his left, a wall of brick built out into the cellar was on his right, and the foundation wall of the house was behind him. He was being driven into a corner.

Worse than all else, he heard sounds which plainly indicated that one or the other of the two men in the pit was forcing himself out from under the mass that had been cast down upon them both.

If either of them was able to come to Brown's aid, Nick knew that his own chance for life would be less than nothing.

He must settle the question between himself and Brown without an instant's delay.

Here was where Nick's splendid training as a boxer came in play. He feigned a sudden retreat.

"I've got him cornered now," was the thought that flashed through Brown's brain, as he saw Nick back away toward the wall.

Nick could read the triumph in the eyes of his foe.

Then suddenly the detective stepped forward, and met the giant's rush with a tremendous blow planted squarely on the jaw.

The action was so unexpected that the hardy ruffian had no guard, and no poise.

He went down with a crash, and so much easier than Nick had anticipated, that the detective went down, too, falling on top of his prostrate enemy.

Brown had just consciousness enough left to lock his enormous arms around Nick's body like a gigantic vise.

Then, with a convulsive movement, he turned the detective over, and rolled on top of him. But Nick was too wily and too strong to be held in such a position.

He, in turn, threw Brown off, though he could not loosen the clasp of those powerful arms.

The consequence was that the struggling foes rolled over once too often. Before Nick realized his danger, they were over the side of the pit.

The excavation had been so far filled by Nick's landslide that he and his antagonist fell only about five feet.

They came down exactly on the head of Harris, who was struggling out from under the debris.

Brown still struggled and clung to Nick, despite the detective's terrible "short-arm" work upon his opponent's ribs. Harris, though beaten back by the fall of the two men, had still some fight in him, and Nick's fate still trembled in the balance.

But suddenly a loud cry rang through the cellar.

Though the giant's arms seemed to be crushing Nick's ribs, he still had breath enough for an answering shout.

For he recognized the voice.
It was Chick's, and it meant that the fight was over.

CHAPTER X.

A VAST TREASURE.

"Chick, you have saved my life again."
"Oh, no; not quite so hard, Nick! You'd have done the rascals alone."

"Well, I don't know. He is one of the hardest citizens I ever had to deal with."

As Nick spoke, he pointed to Brown, who lay bound upon the cellar floor.

Beside him was Harris, looking like a disinterred corpse. He was alive, though, and very ugly.

The men whom Chick had brought with him were engaged in clearing away the earth from on top of McCreary.

They found him at last lying flat on his face upon the vault's top.

He was alive, but unconscious. His first words when restored to the possession of his faculties, were:

"How long have I been buried alive?"

Nobody answered immediately, and he asked:

"Is it more than two days?"

"He has suffered all the agonies which he planned to inflict upon you," said Chick, to whom Nick had told the story of the horrible revenge which McCreary had proposed.

"I suppose you wondered why I was so long in coming," Chick continued.

"Well, I would have been glad to see you at any time during the night," Nick replied, with a smile.

"Patsy's telegram went wrong," said Chick. "It was delayed several hours."

"That made it much harder for me to follow your trail when I finally picked it up."

"I finally spotted this house, but not seeing either you or Patsy about I decided that something was wrong. So I sent out for more men."

"And you came at the nick of time. All's well that ends well. Now let's examine the robbers' treasure-house."

The four keys were found in the earth, which was quickly cleared away from the top of the vault. They were fitted, and, with the aid of oil, turned in their locks.

Then the heavy door was thrown back, revealing a cavity about four feet square.

A great sheet of chamois skin was the first object visible, and when it was lifted it disclosed a dazzling spectacle.

"Jewels by the bushel," exclaimed Chick. "What do you say to that, Doctor Raymond?"

Indeed Doctor Raymond was present, having been brought along by Chick.

"I say," said the doctor, "that only one man living could have solved the mystery of my resident patient's connection with this heap of treasure. In my opinion, no such detective work was ever done before."

With that verdict the story ends.

The stolen treasure was most of it claimed, and Nick has many a jewel which the owners presented to him in recognition of his work.

Neither Colonel Harding nor Patsy was found to be seriously injured. Indeed the young detective was on his feet again in a few days.

The three cracksmen will have to answer for a more serious offense than burglary when next they appear at the bar of justice.

Murder will be the charge, and the verdict cannot be in doubt.

That strange, mysterious crime, the hanging of Burglar Joe, will be avenged.

(THE END.)

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